UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/49/276
25 July 1994

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Forty-ninth session
Item 114 of the provisional agenda*

PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Review of, inter alia, the need for and usefulness and timely issuance of verbatim and summary records

Report of the Secretary-General

1. In its resolution 47/202 B of 22 December 1992, the General Assembly decided that, at its forty-ninth session, there should be a comprehensive review of the need for and usefulness and timely issuance of verbatim and summary records, on the basis of a report submitted by the Secretary-General through the Committee on Conferences and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions. The present report is submitted in response to that decision.

2. As part of the broader issue of the control and limitation of documentation, the General Assembly has scrutinized the provision of meeting records on numerous occasions. In resolution 47/202 B, the Assembly encouraged those bodies that received summary records and whose reports exceeded the 32-page limit to consider relinquishing their entitlement to summary records. It also urged that summary records should be waived when drafting was being undertaken in formal session and duly recorded in the report.

3. Subsequently, in its resolution 48/222 B of 23 December 1993, the General Assembly encouraged all bodies currently entitled to written meeting records to review the need for such records, particularly verbatim records, and to communicate their recommendations to the Assembly at its forty-ninth session.

4. In view of those appeals from the General Assembly, the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences wrote on 16 May 1994 to the chairmen of subsidiary bodies entitled to written meeting records, requesting their assistance in

* A/49/150.

preparing recommendations for submission to the Assembly at its forty-ninth session. To date, replies have been received relating to four bodies. The Chairman of the International Law Commission noted that the question of written meeting records had been brought to the attention of the Commission by its secretariat and of the Commission's Planning Group by the Legal Counsel. The matter would be considered by the Commission at its current session, and the resultant recommendations would be reported in due course. The Secretary-General of the Conference on Disarmament referred to the unique character of the Conference, as the single multilateral disarmament negotiating forum of the international community, and the importance of maintaining official records of its proceedings, which in his view must continue to be the overriding factors when considering control and limitation of documentation. A reply was received stating that the Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories, which was entitled to transcriptions based on sound recordings of statements made by witnesses, would consider the question at its session in August 1994. The Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space has agreed to establish at its thirty-eighth session in 1995 a Working Group of the Whole to examine the working methods of the Committee and its subsidiary bodies, which would review possible alternatives to verbatim records. The contents of any further replies received will be reported in an addendum to the present report.

A. Need for meeting records

5. The provision of verbatim and summary records is determined by legislative mandates: the criteria have been established by the General Assembly over the years and are embodied in the rules of procedure of the body concerned.

6. Criteria for the provision of meeting records were established by the General Assembly in its resolution 3415 (XXX) of 8 December 1975 and were modified in resolutions 32/71 of 9 December 1977 and 33/56 of 14 December 1978. In its resolution 37/14 C of 16 December 1982, the Assembly confirmed the entitlements to verbatim records of its subsidiary organs as set out in paragraph 2 of the annex to that resolution and reiterated that no subsidiary organ should be entitled to receive verbatim records unless the Assembly had explicitly so approved in a relevant resolution. In the same resolution, the Assembly decided that, for an experimental period of three years, no subsidiary organ of the Assembly should be entitled to summary records, with the exception of seven organs listed in the resolution. Those experimental arrangements were subsequently extended, in the absence of any major objections.

7. In its resolution 45/238 B of 21 December 1990, the General Assembly decided that only six of its subsidiary organs would, exceptionally, be entitled to summary records. Of the six organs listed, the Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean and the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People meet very infrequently, the mandate of the Special Committee against Apartheid was terminated by the General Assembly in its resolution 48/258 of 23 June 1994 and the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law has decided to retain summary records only for certain items. Only the International Law Commission and the Legal Subcommittee of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space still require extensive précis-writing services.

8. Also in resolution 45/238 B, the General Assembly listed three governing bodies for which summary records should continue to be provided to regular and special sessions. Of the three bodies listed, the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have resolved to dispense with summary records, leaving only the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees receiving summary records.

9. In addition, summary records are prepared of the meetings of the following treaty bodies in accordance with their rules of procedure and, as the case may be, of the meetings of the States parties to their relevant conventions: the Committee against Torture (rule 33); the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (rule 44); the Committee on the Rights of the Child (rule 35); the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (rule 33); and the Human Rights Committee (rule 31).

10. Thus the situation as regards entitlement to summary records is that the original reductions decided by the General Assembly have been maintained and even followed by reductions decided by the organs themselves. However, there is little likelihood of any further decisions to waive entitlements. A list of bodies currently entitled to verbatim and summary records is contained in the annex to the present report.

11. As will be seen from the annex, a number of subsidiary bodies of the Security Council receive summary records and this number is increasing. Several such bodies have been established recently to monitor the enforcement of sanctions mandated by the Council and all exercise their entitlement to summary records.

B. Usefulness of meeting records

12. The usefulness of records is of course linked to the extent that they are needed and to the timeliness of their issuance. It can be assumed that, in the absence of any decision to the contrary, the bodies receiving them consider that the records are needed. Small delegations are not able to be represented at all meetings and rely on written records for information about debates held, for instance in the Main Committees of the General Assembly. The view has been expressed, and not only by small delegations, that written records are useful even if, as in the case of summary records, it is not possible to issue them in timely fashion. While archival sound recordings are maintained, they are in any case difficult to consult on specific points. At the fiftieth session of the Human Rights Committee, in March/April 1994, the view was expressed that the lack of summary records at the forty-ninth session, owing to economy measures at the United Nations Office at Geneva, would handicap the Committee in its work and should be rectified ex post facto.

13. The relative usefulness of press releases and summary records has been the subject of discussion over the years and of a conference room paper prepared by the Secretariat for the 1994 substantive session of the Committee on Conferences. The conclusion reached has been that they serve different purposes and that the more detailed summary records are valuable because they show not

only what decisions were adopted but also how they were reached. In this respect, they are analogous to travaux préparatoires which precede the adoption of international conventions and other legal texts.

14. In addition to their usefulness to delegations, written meeting records are also consulted by the staff of substantive departments for the preparation of reports and background papers. Staff reductions in substantive departments have curtailed their capacity for record-keeping and made it necessary for them to rely to a greater extent on records prepared by the Office of Conference and Support Services.

15. Because of the problems that are currently being experienced in ensuring the timely issuance of summary records and are described in paragraph 17 below, these records now serve an archival rather than a topical purpose. Their usefulness resides not, as was previously the case, in their value as instruments for the active use of participants in a discussion but in the account which they provide of past proceedings and legislative deliberations.

C. Timely issuance

16. Verbatim records of Security Council meetings are issued not later than 10 a.m. on the first working day following the meeting. Every effort is made to issue verbatim records of the General Assembly and of other organs entitled to such records as quickly as possible. Delays sometimes occur because of the extra care required for the production of Assembly records in final form and because of bottlenecks at the text-processing, reproduction and distribution stages.

17. The situation regarding summary records is less satisfactory. In order to increase précis-writing capacity, the Office of Conference and Support Services now has précis-writing teams in the English, French, Russian and Spanish Translation Services, for the preparation of summary records. The records are drafted in the language of the Service concerned and then translated into the other languages used by the body in question.

18. The requirement of simultaneous distribution in all the relevant languages precludes issuance of the summary record in the original language only and, considering the importance that delegations have consistently assigned to the simultaneity rule, there is little likelihood of this requirement being abolished. It is at this translation stage that delays occur, caused by the need to give priority to the translation of Security Council documentation and of pre- and in-session documentation for other bodies.

19. Because of the increase in the translation workload over recent years, the Office of Conference and Support Services is experiencing difficulty in complying with the request made by the General Assembly in its resolution 47/202 B that it provide summary records in a timely manner. In this connection, increasing use is being made of contractual translation, which has proved to be a cost-effective way of reducing the backlog in summary record processing. In its report to the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session, 1/ the Committee on Conferences noted the general view of its members

that, unless the current workload trend were reversed, the capacity of the Office to ensure the timely issuance of written records needed to be strengthened.

D. Conclusion

20. In the absence of any such strengthening, the archival purpose of summary records will continue to be served, and the records will be available to delegations before the items concerned are taken up at the body's next session. The goal of timely issuance is not likely to be attained unless some reductions can be achieved in the total volume of documentation processed by the Office of Conference and Support Services.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-eighth Session, Supplement No. 32 (A/48/32/Rev.2).

ANNEX

Current meeting record entitlements

I. VERBATIM RECORDS

A. Issued initially in provisional form for limited distribution and later for general distribution, with delegation corrections and editorial changes incorporated

1. Security Council

2. Military Staff Committee

B. Issued only once, in final form, subject to corrections, which are issued in consolidated corrigenda covering a session or a series of meetings

1. Plenary meetings of the General Assembly

2. Main Committees of the General Assembly:

   (a) First Committee

   (b) Special Political Committee (on a selective basis only)

3. Subsidiary organs of the General Assembly:

   (a) Committee on Applications for Review of Administrative Tribunal Judgements

   (b) Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space

   (c) Disarmament Commission

   (d) Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples

   (e) Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Population of the Occupied Territories (when hearing witnesses)

   (f) United Nations Administrative Tribunal (when holding hearings)

   (g) Subsidiary organs of the General Assembly when holding meetings in the observance of international days of solidarity proclaimed by the Assembly

4. Trusteeship Council

5. Conference on Disarmament

II. SUMMARY RECORDS

A. Issued initially in provisional form for limited distribution and later for general distribution, with delegation corrections and editorial changes incorporated

1. Subsidiary organs of the Security Council:

(a) Committee of Experts established by the Security Council at its 1st meeting in 1946 (to re-examine and make recommendations regarding its rules of procedure)

(b) Committee on the Admission of New Members established by decision of the Security Council at its 42nd meeting, 1946

(c) Committee of Experts (to consider the question of small States and Territories) established by the Security Council at its 1506th meeting

(d) Committee on Council Meetings Away from Headquarters (established by decision taken by the Security Council at its 1625th meeting)

(e) Commission established under Security Council resolution 446/(1979) (to examine the situation in the Arab territories occupied since 1967)

(f) Ad Hoc Committee established under Security Council resolution 507 (1982) (to coordinate and mobilize resources for the Special Fund for the Republic of Seychelles)

(g) Committee established by Security Council resolution 661 (1990) concerning the situation between Iraq and Kuwait

(h) Governing Council of the United Nations Compensation Commission established by Security Council resolution 692 (1991)

(i) Committee established pursuant to Security Council resolution 724 (1991) concerning Yugoslavia

(j) Committee established pursuant to Security Council resolution 748 (1992) concerning the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya

(k) Committee established pursuant to Security Council resolution 751 (1992) concerning Somalia

(l) Committee established pursuant to Security Council resolution 841 (1993) concerning Haiti

(m) Committee established pursuant to Security Council resolution 864 (1993) concerning Angola

(n) Committee established pursuant to Security Council resolution 918 (1994) concerning Rwanda

2. Plenary meetings of the Economic and Social Council

3. International Law Commission

4. International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination:

(a) Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination

(b) Meetings of the States Parties

B. Issued only once, in final form, subject to corrections, which are issued in consolidated corrigenda covering a session or a series of meetings

Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean

Commission on Human Rights and its Subcommission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities

Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People

Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment:

(a) Committee against Torture

(b) Meetings of the States Parties

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women:

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Convention on the Rights of the Child:

(a) Committee on the Rights of the Child

(b) Meetings of the States Parties

Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

General Committee of the General Assembly and Main Committees of the Assembly other than the First Committee and the United Nations Population Fund

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights:

(a) Human Rights Committee

(b) Meetings of the States Parties

Legal Subcommittee of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

United Nations Commission on International Trade Law